DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 318 828 UD 027 421

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TITLE A Comparison of At-Risk and Successful Students' School Experiences in a Multicultural Jr. High.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990).
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PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; *Educational Experience; *High Risk Students; *Individual Differences; Junior High Schools; *Junior High School Students; Personal Narratives; *Student Attitudes; Surveys; Teacher Student Relationship; Urban Schools

ABSTRACT

This study compares the school experiences and beliefs about school of academically at-risk and successful students in a culturally diverse urban middle grade school. Information was analyzed from a survey of a random sample of 110 students, comprised of 48 at-risk students, 43 good/average students, and 36 honor roll students, and intensive interviews and observations with a target group of 27 students within that group. The following findings are reported: (1) by seventh grade, at-risk students were more alienated from school than successful students; (2) for both at-risk and successful students, school experiences and self-image were closely connected to the quality of relationships with teachers; (3) for at-risk students, relationships with teachers were significantly more negative than for successful students and manifested themselves in perceptions of worthlessness to teachers; and (4) relationships with peers were not significantly different for at-risk and successful students. Statistical data on three tables and one graph and a list of 38 references are appended. (FMW)

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A Comparison of At-Risk and Successful Students' School Experiences in a Multicultural Jr. High

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Linda R. Kramer
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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
American Educational Research Association, Boston, 1990.

UD 027 421

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the school experiences of successful and academically at-risk students in one urban middle grade school using a survey of randomly selected students (N=110) and intensive interviews with and observations of a target group (N=27) within that population. Field notes and interview data were triangulated with survey results to generate a description of the differing ways successful and at-risk students identify with school. Results revealed that by seventh grade unsuccessful students were clearly more alienated from school. For both successful and at-risk students, school experiences and self-images were closely connected to the quality of the relationships students shared with teachers. For at-risk students, these relationships were significantly more negative and manifested themselves in perceptions of worthlessness to teachers. In this study , successful and at-risk students' relationships with classmates were not significantly different.

Fueled by statistics that report the increasing numbers of youth who are unprepared to lead productive adult lives, educators have begun to look toward the middle grades to understand how students become alienated from school life. (Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989). It is the contention of this paper that the middle grades are an important, but ignored, phase of schooling in the lives of students who eventually drop out, and that attention to students' experiences in these grades may provide a better understanding of the developmental processes that lead students to leave school.

A proliferation of recent studies show that dropouts are more likely to have backgrounds in which lower socioeconomic status and limited educational achievement are factors (Ekstron, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987), and that they are more likely to be minority students, particularly Hispanics or blacks (Ogbu, 1987). We also know that these are students who do not like school, and who act out their disengagement through absenteeism, truancy, disruptive behavior, decreased motivation, and poor academic work (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Ekstron, et al. 1986; Howard & Anderson, 1978; Tuck, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Knowing this, however, has not enabled researchers to predict who will drop out. Neither statistical models using data collected in early grades nor those using data collected in later grades can predict potential dropouts more accurately than using no model at all (California State Department, 1986). Rumberger (1987) has suggested that the missing piece is systematic study of the long term processes that culminate in leaving school.

Who drops out? Wehlage et al. (1986) indicate that leaving high school is the end result of a long series of complex events in which institutional factors play a part. Building on this study, Bryk and Thum (1989) argue that smaller high schools characterized by increased opportunities for positive student-teacher interactions, and where students pursue common academic studies result in a coherent, engaging environment. Other studies (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988; Fine, 1986; Miller, Leinhardt, & Zigmond, 1988) support the notion that student engagement is affected by the human interactions that occur in schools, and that these, in turn, are affected by the organization and structure of the school. Specifically, student perceptions of teachers as disinterested and uncaring (Moos & Moos, 1978; Tuck, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1986), unfair discipline policies (Rumberger, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1986) infrequent opportunities for involvement and success (Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner,1988; Howard et al., 1978), and association with delinquent peers (Elliott & Voss, 1974; Hawkins & Weis, 1985; ; Howard et al., 1978) surface as critical elements in the process of becoming alienated from school.

This process, however, does not begin with high schools, nor is it descriptive of only students at-risk of dropping out. Researchers have found that a general decline in academic motivation begins in the middle grades, concluding that a mismatch exists between early adolescents' developmental needs and the school environments they experience upon leaving the elementary grades (Eccles & Midgley, 1988; 1989). Hirsh & Rapkin (1987) have associated the transition to junior high school with a plunge in students' perceptions of the quality of school life, a plunge that does not necessarily reverse itself with time. Other studies have found that alienation is experienced to some degree by many successful students (Wehlage et al., 1986). A small but growing body of research on middle grade students identified as at-risk of failure (Hawkins et al., 1988; Stevens & Pihl, 1987; Strahan, 1988; Van Hoose, 1989) illustrates the need to look carefully at the general instructional climate of middle grade schools, and specifically at the interventions provided for students at-risk. Many students begin showing signs of alienation in the early grades (Richardson, Casanova, Placier, & Guilfoyle, 1989;), and the earlier students drop out of school, the less likely they are to return (Tuck, 1989).

The present study is concerned with the experiences and beliefs about school held by early adolescents identified as potential dropouts, and how their experiences and beliefs differ from those of more successful students attending the same school. Finn (1989) has outlined two models for studying at-risk students. According to the Frustration-Self-

Esteem Model, the student's self-view, in connection with academic failure, is considered the central mediator of problem behavior. In the Participation-Identification Model, nonparticipation is seen as the implied starting point of behaviors associated with dropping out. Both models stress the importance of developing and maintaining some sense of identification with school.

The framework for this study was a phenomenological one using the tenets of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969). Basic to this framework is the assumption that human experience is mediated by interpretation: experiences do not possess their own independent meaning, but meaning is conferred on them by individuals through interaction with others. The goal is to capture the *emic* or insider's perspective by making inferences about the interpretations participants share. From this perspective it is assumed that students' interpretations of their school experiences are essential, and not secondary, to what their experiences are: interpretations influence identification with school. Thus, self-view and nonparticipation are seen as interactive components in the process of events that lead to dropping out.

This theoretical perspective necessitated the use of interpretive-ethnographic methods to discover what was fundamental to the early adolescents participating in the study. As Farrell, et al. (1988) concluded from an ethnographic study in which students were collaborators in the data collection, proposing solutions to the dropout problem must entail programs based on students' perceptions. The design of this study was based on techniques described by Erikson (1986) and Spradley (1980).

These research questions, suggested by the literature, guided the data collection:

1. What commonly held views about school experiences do early adolescents at-risk of failure share? In what ways are their views different?

2 What are the patterns in school identification that are common to students who are at-risk and to students who are successful?

Method

The Research Site

Southwest Jr. High was chosen as the site for this study on the basis of its participation in a state-wide Partnership Schools Program, a network of schools identified for their "uncommon commitment" to be and become state-of-the-art middle grade schools (California State Department, 1987). Chief among Southwest's goals for improvement was assisting all students in the development of personal connectedness to school (school document: Application for the Partnership Project). Southwest's decision to address, in particular, the situation of students they considered to be at-risk of dropping out was the primary criterion for its selection.

Description of the the Site. Southwest is urban school in California located in an older, predominantly Asian section of a large city. Approximately 850 seventh through ninth graders attend the school, over half of whom come from the neighborhood's low income families. Many of them are recent immigrants from camps in Laos and Vietnam. Approximately 20% have very little or no English, and numerous others come from families in which English is spoken as a second language. The ethnic composition of the school is 47% Orientals, 31% whites, 16% Hispanics, 6% blacks, and .3% native Americans. Because of its unique population, administrators at Southwest cite language acquisition and communication problems, cultural differences, economic disadvantages, and social adjustments as the school's greatest challenges (school document).

The cultural diversity at Southwest has characterized the school to varying degrees for the past ten years. Thus the school has in place a well established English as a Second Language (ELEPSS) curriculum, math and history classes in three major languages, "sheltered" and "bridging" classes for students with limited English, race and human relations programs, and a program of community outreach. Efforts are on-going to involve parents and to improve home-school relationships through a series of workshops and

"principal chats" at Indochinese clan meetings in the five elementary feeder school communities.

At Southwest a "limited tracking" approach is used to match students with appropriate classes. A district developed mastery learning program is used in the majority of classes to assist students in the development of fundamental skills. Gifted and advanced curriculums are also offered in all the core subject areas, including some advanced courses taught in primary languages other than English. For students with identified needs there are special education programs and special classes which allow students to be self-contained for a portion of the day.

The school buildings, themselves, are two-story structures connected by walkways, and described by the principal as "in need of several coats of bright paint". Though somewhat rundown, the daily efforts of the staff keep the buildings in good repair and relatively free of graffiti. Administrators and teachers monitor the hallways with walkie-talkies, and police patrol the surrounding neighborhood regularly. Despite this, some students at Southwest report a reluctance to stay after school for activities, citing groups of older adolescents who "hang out around the corners near the school and sometimes fight". Over the course of the study a gang related shooting occurred in the school' s neighborhood, and on several occasions gang slogans were observed on the walls of the school.

The At-Risk Program. The year the study began Southwest Jr. High counselors identified a group of 31 at-risk students using grade point averages (GPA) from the first grading period. Parents of students who had failed three or more courses were sent letters identifying their early adolescents as at-risk students and requesting permission to place them in a special class for one hour a day. Two such classes were organized under two different teachers and referred to as Directed Study, a course which took the place of an elective. In these smaller classes students were given tutorial assistance by teachers and aides in a less formal classroom environment. Students were allowed to help each other and work together as long as they remained on-task. Directed Study teachers closely supervised the progress of students, acting as liaisons between students and other teachers whenever possible, contacting parents, and assisting students in the development of better study habits.

In addition to the Directed Study classes, the school made several other institutional accommodations (Miller, et al., 1988) for at-risk students. First, a special advisory class was organized that allowed some of the at-risk students to meet informally several times a week to talk about social and personal problems with more successful peers and a teacher-facilitator. This idea is the hallmark of many middle schools; advisory classes are organized on a school-wide basis to address developmental needs of early adolescents (Alexander & George, 1981). At Southwest, the advisory class for at-risk students was organized on a trial basis as a part of their participation in the Partnership Schools Program. Second, several at-risk students were assigned as student assistants to the school counselors and attendance clerks during the first few periods of the day. It was hoped that this arrangement would facilitate closer relationships with administrative personnel, particularly guidance counselors, and act as a stimulus to get students to school on time.

Participants

Students achieving at three different levels were selected to participate in an initial inventory of beliefs about school. The inventory group included all 31 students who had been identified as *at-risk* by the counselors, 43 randomly selected *good/average* students, and 36 randomly selected*honor roll*. students. The mean cumulative GPA for each of the three achievement groups at the end of the third quarter of the school year was as follows: at-risk-1.0 (S.D.=.48), good/average-2.9 (S.D.= .43), and honor students-3.8 (S.D.=.16). No students who were being served in "sheltered" or "bridging" classes were identified for the at-risk group or included in the pools from which other students were

drawn. Slightly over half (53%) the participants were female, and, with the exception of five ninth grade at-risk students, all participants were in seventh (45%) and eighth grades (51%). The decision to include only seventh and eighth graders in the inventory group was based on the Partnership Program's emphasis on improving educational opportunities for students in these middle grades; the decision to include the ninth grade at-risk students was based on a desire to sample the total group.

While the ethnic composition of the total inventory group closely matched the overall composition of Southwest Jr. High, differences existed when comparisons were made among the three achievement groups. At Southwest, the vast majority of students who made the honor roll were Oriental, thus 89% of the honors achievement group were Oriental. The at-risk group, however, was 32% Hispanic, 32% white, 13% black, 13% Oriental, and 10% native American. The ethnic backgrounds of students in the good/average group were representative of the school as a whole.

Self-reports of parental educationalso indicated that the inventory group closely matched the school. Approximately 35% of the mothers and 17% of the fathers had not completed high school, 23% of the mothers and 30% of the fathers had high school educations only, 30% of the mothers and 35% of the fathers had advanced degrees. Follow up investigations of students who did not report information for mothers' (12%) or fathers' (18%) education revealed that in some cases students were separated from parents and had only partial knowledge of their education, or that parents had no formal schooling, an option which had not been listed on the form. Examination of the educational backgrounds of students by achievement groups did not indicate robust differences. In fact, many of the students in the honors group, as well as those in the good/average group, came from families in which one or both parents had limited education, and many students in the at-risk group had one or both parents with high school educations and beyond.

From the three achievement groups a target group of 27 students was randomly selected for intensive interviews and observations. These students were selected to represent a balance of ethnic backgrounds, grade levels, and sex, as well as achievement group membership. Several at-risk students, however, were automatically excluded from selection as target students due to their frequent absences from school. Since absenteeism is the strongest behavioral predictor of dropping out (Bryk et al., 1989; deJung, et al., 1986) it is possible that qualitative data collected for this group reflect its least alienated members. The following student essays are provided as extreme examples to differentiate among at-risk students who were frequently absent from school, and therefore not included in the target group, and at-risk students whose school attendance was satisfactory.

> Omitted from Target Group.: in ten years from now i'm going to live in [Mexico] doing nothing,I'm not going to work, and *I'm dropping out of School.* (Student emphasis supplied by writing in larger script.)

> Target Student: Ten years from now I will probebly be in law school. The job I will have would be a Mechanic, while I am not in law school. I want to become a jugde, because I like to decide things, and punish people. (he he he)
>
> What I would do for fun is work on cars. The reason why is because I really enjoy puting things together. Plus I am real good at it right now at my age of 13, I can rebuild an Engine.
>
> How I would prepare for that is to *STAY IN SCHOOL!!!* (Student emphasis supplied by capitalizing and underlining.)

At-risk students selected for the target group ranged in positive identification with school between the two extremes illustrated above.

Procedures

> According to Erikson (1986):
> The progressive problem solving of fieldwork entails a process of sequential sampling. Preconceptions and guiding questions are present from the outset, but the researcher does not presume from the outset to know where, specifically, the initial questions might lead. In consequence the researcher begins with the most comprehensive possible survey of the setting and its surrounding environments. (p.143)

To conduct a comprehensive survey of successful and at-risk students' experiences at Southwest, the first step taken was the administration of an inventory to the large sample of students during the third quarter of the school year. Intensive interviews and observations of a smaller subsample of that population followed. Differences in students' views obtained from the inventory were used to the refine the study's guiding questions, provide a broad background against which qualitative data could be compared, and develop a more complete picture of the school experiences of students achieving at three different levels at Southwest.

Beliefs about School Inventory. Items for the inventory were drawn from the Self-Concept in School section of the Pennsylvania Quality Assessment (PQA). This instrument was developed specifically to measure a set of constructs relevant to school performance and attitudes. The section on self-concept contains items categorized into three major clusters: (1) teacher relationships, (2) peer relationships, and (3) school self-image. Students are given short, self-descriptive statements reflecting the school context and asked to respond using strongly agree, mostly agree, mostly disagree, and strongly disagree. The reliability for the Self-Concept in School section of the PQA is .87 (Pennsylvania State Department, 1988).

The inventory was administered to good/average and honor students by the researcher and four assistants in large group settings. Students were told to respond to the inventory items based on their experiences at Southwest, that codes would be used to identify their responses, that no correct answers existed, and that no one other than the researcher would have access to their inventories. Following the completion of the inventory, students were asked to write essays about their ideal futures and how they might prepare themselves for that future.

The inventory was administered to at-risk students separately in their Directed Study classes by the researcher and two assistants. Several days before the inventory data was collected, the researcher met with each class to explain the goal of the study and to discuss any questions students might have. At-risk students were told that different classes in the school had been selected to participate in a study about students' views of school, and that Directed Study was such as class. The time spent establishing rapport with the at-risk students, explaining that they might be asked to participate in interviews, and soliciting their ideas about school observations was considered an essential step in the data gathering process with students who might be alienated or disruptive. Indeed, the Directed Study teachers cautioned the researcher prior to the administration of the inventory that a different approach to these students would be required to gain their cooperation.

In administering the inventory to at-risk students the researcher read the items orally and paused while students responded to eliminate the risk of invalid answers caused by poor reading or comprehension skills. Directions were otherwise the same as those given in the large group settings, and students were given the rest of period to write essays about their ideal futures. Five students in the at-risk group at first refused to complete either the inventory or the essay. These students were told by the researcher in an accepting manner that they could choose not to complete these activities without ramification, but that their beliefs about school were important and that their participation was needed. The diffusion of defiance that resulted when students were not confronted with demands or absolutes

provided the first opportunity for observation of the group as a whole. Several visits to the Directed Study classes were needed to gather inventory data due to the frequent absences of some of the students in this group.

Interviews and Observations. The researcher assumed the role of participant-observer during the course of the study in an attempt to capture the actual thoughts and experiences of the students at Southwest. Formal interviews that lasted approximately an hour were conducted with target students in a variety of locations in the building: in empty classrooms, the nurse's office, the school hallways, and empty conference rooms. Students in the good/average and honors achievement groups were pulled out of elective classes to participate in interviews, and met the researcher in a waiting area just outside the counselors' offices. At-risk students were interviewed during the time allotted to their Directed Study class. Formal interviews stretched over the third and fourth quarters of the school year and were interspersed with informal interviews of individuals and small groups. Formal interviews were recorded on audiotape and in writing, and were transcribed by the researcher and an assistant.

The waiting area outside the counselors' offices serendipitously proved to be fertile ground from which to begin participant-observations. During any given day, the researcher was able to interact with at-risk students assigned as student assistants in the office. In addition, numerous other at-risk students frequented the waiting area as they reported to the office with behavior referrals from their classroom teachers. On several occasions students were kept in the waiting area from one to two hours due to the counselors' schedules, or the instructions of their teachers that they not be allowed to return to the class in session. The researcher used these occasions to spend extended time in the waiting area, informally talking with students and observing their behaviors in groups. Observations were also conducted in the Directed Study classes, before and after school, and at lunch. Field notes written during observations were recorded in as much detail as possible and represented what Spradley (1980) called a condensed account of what had occurred. Observations focused on how at-risk students interacted with peers, teachers, and the content of lessons, and were compared with students' descriptions during interviews.

Informal interviews were also conducted with administrators, counselors, and the Directed Study teachers to obtain background on at-risk students and the at-risk program at Southwest.

Rist (1982) has suggested that gaining entry and developing rapport with participants are the most critical phases of qualitative research. This is particularly true in studies of students who are at-risk, and by definition detached and alienated. During this study, the researcher took great care

> not to have the manner or appearance of any group which his informant group distinguishes sharply from itself. This does not mean forcing identity with the informant group; it does mean that the observer of students, if he wishes a good understanding with them, will avoid the manner of teacher and authoritative adult. (Geer, 1969, p.147)

By the second week of interviews/observations numerous participants knew the researcher by sight and stopped her in the hallways or the counselors' waiting area to inquire about the study. Additional evidence that the researcher had been accepted by students, particularly those in the at-risk group, was provided when a counselor made an unsolicited comment to the researcher: "You must be a good listener or maybe the students must like you. Some of the difficult ones have told me they like talking to you."

Document Collection. Unobtrusive measures of students' experiences were derived from suspension, truancy, and referral records kept by the school, and from students' academic histories documented in their cumulative folders. These records were examined for all 110 students in the inventory group, with special attention to the records of the target population. Student essays on their ideal futures as well as other class assignments were examined.

Finally, district documents related to a pilot study of four innovative middle grade schools, of which Southwest was one, were collected. Other documents collected and reviewed included school documents related to participation in the Partnership Schools Program. Collection of documents such as these enable the researcher to gain a sense of how the school wishes to be perceived.

Analyses

To analyze data from qualitative studies is to generate empirical assertions or themes through induction, and to establish their validity by systematically searching for confirming and disconfirming evidence (Erikson, 1986; Spradley, 1980).

The Beliefs about School Inventory. Analysis of the inventory provided a broad picture of school experiences against which qualitative data collected from the target group could be compared and contrasted. Students were first classified by ethnicity to discern whether or not differences existed among ethnic groups with respect to the inventory data. The ethnicity factor produced F-values of .22 (p=.98) for teacher items, .34 (p=.93) for peer items, and .80 (p=.59) for school self-image items. None of the interaction effects had a probability smaller than .61. Thus, ethnicity could not be supported as an explanation for the responses given on the inventory.

Because of numerous empty cells, data from the inventory were then collapsed from a four by three into a two by two format . Students in the honors and good/average groups became one achievement group (honors/average), and at-risk students became the second. Strongly and mostly agree became one category, and strongly and mostly disagree the second. This reduction of data overcame the weakness of multiple empty cells. A two-sample proportions test was used to discern whether the percentage of positive responses given by the honors/average group was statistically different from the percentage of positive answers given by the at-risk group. Results are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Qualitative Data. Analysis began during fieldwork and consisted of daily transcriptions of audiotapes or field notes into a Hyperqual computer program, searching for meaning patterns and categories. Hyperqual facilitates the entry of data, providing the means to keep organized sets of project memos, field notes, diagrams, and sets of interview cards in a variety of formats. Though Hyperqual also provides a means to identify and sort data chunks, coding and categorizing of the data were conducted by hand. This process continued throughout data collection and involved repeated readings of the entire data record as it grew. From these readings and the questions which guided data collection, assertions were derived about the school experiences of successful and at-risk students at Southwest. Four copies of the complete record of interviews, observations, and documents were printed to permit multiple codings, and a final copy of the data record was cut and sorted into relevant categories using separate folders for each category. Lastly, the inventory completed by each target student was cross-checked with data from interview transcripts and observations.

Assertions were tested and refined during a thorough search for confirming and disconfirming evidence in field notes, interviews, documents, and inventory items. To counteract possible biases in data collection, data from these multiple sources were triangulated, and assertions that could not be supported by more than one source were eliminated. Finally, data were reviewed and corroborated by a second researcher conducting a separate study of responsive journal writing with the same population of at-risk students in the Directed Study classes.

Results of the Study

The following assertions were derived from the data.

1. Early adolescents at-risk of failure act out alienation from school in both quiet (in school, but withdrawn from activity) and loud (disruptive behaviors, truancies, absenteeism) ways.

2. At-risk and successful students have relationships with teachers characterized by different levels of mutual respect; classroom behavior is a central component in the respect relationship.

3. Extended friendship networks influence at-risk students' positive identification with school.

4. At-risk students feel responsible for their performance but are unsure how to take responsibility for their learning.

Assertion 1. Early adolescents at-risk of school failure act out alienation from school in both quiet and loud ways.

The earliest impressions of the at-risk students garnered from the first meetings held in their Directed Study classes were of exceptionally quiet students, almost to the point of appearing depressed or sleepy, and exceptionally loud students who seemed angry or defiant. The defiant students asserted their unwillingness to cooperate in varying ways; the quiet students merely sat, waiting for the next event to happen. Forewarning from the Directed Study teachers who were most concerned about defiant students, and past experience conducting interpretive-ethnographic studies with adolescents, led to the decision to use communication techniques such as those described by Ginott (1972). In giving students the power to decide to cooperate, even defiant students picked up pencils to complete the inventory and write the essay.

That the vast majority of both hostile and quiet students shared a lack of what Finn (1989) defines as identification with the school was clear initally from their essays, and later from their comments and behaviors. According to Finn, identification is synonymous with numerous terms used in the literature such as involvement, attachment, bonding, and commitment. It is an internal state with two components, belonging and valuing, that lead to increased participation in school as opposed to alienation and disengagement. The pattern that emerged from essay analysis was an image of school as nebulous or unrelated to the future, and early meetings with the students provided numerous opportunities to observe this detachment communicated silently and angrily.

These early impressions were supported through the examination of school behavior records that tended to capture loud expressions of alienation, particularly when at-risk students were compared with successful students in the other achievement groups, and through observations and interviews in which quiet students first put a name to their detachment.

Researcher: What kind of a student would you say you are?
BH: Quiet.
Researcher: Quiet? Do you study a lot?
BH: Nothing.
Researcher: Not at all?
BH: No.
Researcher: Are you satisfied with nothing?
BH: Right now.
Researcher: When you get to high school will it be harder? (No reply. Researcher probes for ways high school will be different.)
BH: [laughs] No, it's going to be the same.
Researcher: Do you ever think about quitting, about not coming back?

BH: Yeah. Everyday.

Researcher: What would you really like to learn about?
PI: I'm the type that's lazy so I really can't answer that question.
Researcher: You're lazy. What does that mean?
PI: I have the same problem with my mom. She tries to get me to do work around the house. I'm lazy. I don't get along in classes because of it. That's the usual.

Quiet students were not all alike in their behaviors, but they did tend to answer the question, "What kind of student are you?" in ways illustrated by the above excerpts. They appeared lethargic, and many of them confessed to being unable to get out of bed and get to school on time. The females, particularly, spoke in quiet voices, used little eye contact in the first days of data collection, and spoke quantitatively less with the researcher, even when participating in formal interviews. Probes were necessary to elicit the most minimum of replies from quiet students, while more assertive students gave detailed answers, frequently using challenging nonverbal behavior such as staring at the researcher.

School records of student behavior collected during the year illustrated the ways in which students loudly disengaged from school. As might be predicted, dramatic differences were found when at-risk students were compared to good/average and honor students, and smaller, but intriguing, differences were found among individuals within the same group. As Graph 1 illustrates, truancies, referrals, and suspensions were significantly more numerous in the at-risk group.

Insert Graph 1.

Referrals written for misbehavior related to defiance and disruption in class such as talking back, coming late to class, not dressing out for physical education, and not following directions. Counting the frequency of referrals written by teachers who had the at-risk students in class revealed two groups of teachers: those who wrote numerous referrals and those who wrote very few or none. Unfortunately for those who wrote numerous referrals, records indicated that the seriousness of defiant behavior tended to escalate, particularly when referrals were directed at a few specific students. An example of the degree of escalation that typically occurred was the misbehavior exhibited by Karl in Mr. P's class between September and November, and documented in that teacher's referrals.

9/2: Defiance and talking back. Student said: I'm talking to myself so why don't you just shut up?. Request in-school suspension for tomorrow.
10/30: Defiance of class rules and attention getting behavior that continues to disrupt our class. Tearing up paper after told to stop. Pulled pants down in front of class, yelled twice at me after being told to get rid of his gum and stop talking. He was out of his assigned seat without permission earlier. Request he be suspended from my class.
11/21: Verbal threats made to teacher while teacher was discussing reading group procedure. Karl said: Mr. P must get hurt. I request that Karl be suspended from my class for one day. I will call his mother today. (Follow up on this referral resulted in a conversation with the school police regarding the seriousness of making threats.)

For three students in the at-risk group, this sequence of events was a familiar one. These students received the greatest number of referrals in the group, and received them predominately from a select group of teachers.

The discovery of specific at-risk students who seemed to be more disruptive than others lead to the collection of past records available for eighth and ninth graders who had

attended Southwest for more than one year. A comparison of referrals/suspensions with truancies for these students revealed a trend. Students with numerous truancies one year had fewer referrals, but years in which they had fewer truancies were years in which the number of referrals they received dramatically increased. Thus, it seemed that for some at-risk students merely attending school increased their chances of receiving referrals or suspensions. Suspensions, however, were only given for extreme situations. According to district codes, students should be suspended for behaviors in one of two categories: physical injury to another or disruption and violence. The disruption and violence category was used when students either committed violent acts that did not cause physical harm, or when students accumulated an undue number of disruption referrals.

Though many successful students at Southwest mentioned minor behavior problems during interviews with the researcher, recorded instances were few with the exception two students. For these good/average students, one of whom was included in the target group, behavior records similar to those of the majority of at-risk students existed. Interviews and follow-up data collection with Diane, the target student, enabled the researcher to find confirming evidence of a relationship between misbehavior and decreased achievement for students other than those in the at-risk group. Diane's cumulative GPA when she was first identified for the good/average group was 2.83. During the course of the study, as she grew increasingly negative toward school, her grades began to drop. The following excerpt was taken from an interview with Diane in May.

> Researcher: What do really like about school? What makes you happy?
> DD: Nothing really. I just come because I have to. Because I don't want to grow up being stupid.
> Researcher: There's nothing you look forward to?
> DD: Ummm....[defiantly] Getting an education?
> Researcher: Do you think there's a way to get an education without coming to school?
> DD: [shakes her head no]
> Researcher: It has to be this way?
> DD: [softly] yeah.

Diane's negative feelings took the form anger, and at one point in the study she reported to the researcher that she was involved in a major argument with the vice principal over an incident that had occurred in class. "One piece of advice I have," she reported, "is don't get in a fight with the vice principal. It's better to keep it to yourself." At the end of the first grading period the year following the study, Diane's GPA was .83. Shortly thereafter she was identified by the counselors as at-risk, and she became a member of the Directed Study class. Follow up data collected on the second student also showed a drop in GPA from 3.0 to 1.8 at the end of the first grading period the following year. Action taken to address the situation, if any, was unknown to the researcher.

Did at-risk students' disruptive behavior or quiet detachment begin when they moved from elementary schools to Southwest Jr. High? Examination of academic histories contained in cumulative folders gave no answers. What was notable was a lack of anecdotal information in the students' folders, and the numerous folders which were missing information for one or more grade levels. Several contained no information prior to the student's enrollment at Southwest. For those for whom complete records were available, the trend was toward satisfactory or below satisfactory marks in elementary school, with reading the weakest subject. Three of the records indicated that students had attended between five and seven elementary schools, and on several records were notations indicating excessive absences in one or more of the grades. Nine of the at-risk students had repeated one year of school, in most cases on or before the third grade.

In comparison, academic histories examined for good good/average students and honor students showed well above satisfactory progress for all students through the sixth grade. There was, however, a noticeable drop in scores for eighth grade students whose seventh grade records were complete, indicating a transition problem that students alluded to in interviews as well.

The flow of interviews over the course of the study revealed that the demenor of at-risk students underwent a change. Talking to the researcher became almost therapeutic, in part because they could name few adults in the school to whom they would go with problems.

> Researcher: Is there an adult here you could go to if you wanted advice about your classes or when you want to talk about personal problems?
> FH: ummm...Yes. You.
> Researcher: Me? I'm not around all day. It has to be someone besides me.
> FH: My friends, I guess. No teachers.

Support for this observation was found in two additional sources. First, the researcher conducting the responsive journal writing study with the at-risk students independently found the same phenomenon(Colvin, in progress). Students' journal responses increased quantitatively and qualitatively over the course of the year, becoming more revealing and insightful about their own problems in school. Secondly, good/average and honor students frequently described what they believed to be the problems of students who didn't do well at Southwest as relationship problems.

> Honor Student: Half of my friends are rough. They get in trouble. I think the difference between them [and those who do not] is attention. They want attention. They need attention. They get the attention from other kids. Most of them don't like school.

Assertion 2. At-risk and successful students have relationships with teachers characterized by different levels of mutual respect; classroom behavior is a central component in the respect relationship.

District-directed research conducted at the school shortly before this study began indicated that students at Southwest held negative feelings about communication with teachers and counselors, believing that these adults did not understand them (district document: Evaluation of the Pilot for Improving Education in the Middle School). Several classes of seventh and eighth grade students unknown to the researcher participated in the district study, and no criteria were provided in the study to indicate how classes were chosen to participate. These findings, however, were repeated in both the inventory and in interview data collected. The extent of negative feelings between students and teachers, and how they affected successful and at-risk students' experiences at Southwest will be addressed in this section.

Insert Table 1.

Did at-risk and successful students at Southwest interpret their relationships with teachers in different ways? Table 1 displays the inventory data related to teachers. Items marked with a (-) indicate items that were scored in a negative direction. For example, for the item, *My teachers usually ignore me*, 85% of the honors/average students reported that they were not ignored by teachers (positive response) as compared to 68% of the at-risk students. No difference was found between the groups on this item or on the items, *...My teachers correct me without hurting my feelings*, and *My teachers expect better work...than*

I am able to do. The items that did reveal significant differences were items related to student feelings of value or worth to teachers, and these items favored the successful students. How did at-risk students come to believe their teachers did not understand them, would not listen to their ideas, and did not consider them worthwhile? What made significantly more at-risk students feel "put down" by their teachers? These new questions guided subsequent interviews and observations.

Teachers are a central part of life in any school; schools could not exist without them. Thus, it is not unreasonable for students to talk about schools in terms of the teachers with whom they interact. Interviews and informal conversations with students at Southwest illustrated the critical role teachers played in the lives of students. They surfaced in almost every conversation about daily events, in content-specific remarks (i.e. about social studies or math) students made, and as sources of identification with school when students were asked what they liked and did not like most. The differences between at-risk students' remarks and those of more successful students were revealing. Teachers did not surface as a category when at-risk students described what they liked about school, though two of the target students did mention learning or getting an education. In contrast, 30% of the successful students mentioned teachers as what they liked most about school. The opposite was true when students described what they disliked or what gave them problems. Teachers were not mentioned by successful students who focused their descriptions on gangs, fighting, and getting bad grades, but they were mentioned in 50% of the at-risk students' descriptions of what caused them the most problems.

> Researcher: What do you dislike most about school? What really gives you problems?
> JD: If you get yelled at by your teacher in front of the whole class. If your grade isn't right or if you take a test and you get stuck in it and you don't know what to do and you fail. Just things that happen on a bad day.
>
> DS: Some teachers and some students are a pain.
> Researcher: What do you mean 'some teachers'?
> DS: Sometimes I'll be doing my work and I ask a question or I say something and they say,*'Get out of the classroom!'* (Student emphasis) Maybe I didn't hear and they send me out. [pause] Sometimes I am being rude and I know it.

With these differences in mind, fieldnotes were searched for the word, *teacher*, as it was used by successful and at-risk students, and diagrams were constructed to determine differences in the roles/qualities these groups of students ascribed to teachers.

Successful Students Beliefs about Teachers. Successful students described their teachers in a variety of roles: as caring or uncaring, as instructors, and as objects of respect.

"My friends are always complaining about the teachers, even some teachers we don't have. We hear things about about them from other kids, and sometimes the things aren't true" (Honors Student). Successful students, as a group, were more positive about teachers than were at-risk students, but descriptions within the group varied. "The kind you can talk to" were specific teachers whose names were repeatedly mentioned, and who were differentiated from others by phrases such as, "but most teachers aren't like that." In general, teachers were cast into the roles of caring or uncaring based on whether students felt teachers would listen and could be trusted. Comments like "One of my teachers I can talk to. She compliments you but she also corrects you." and "Ms. B. really listens. She asks you to come back and talk after class." were typical descriptions successful students applied to the specific teachers they felt were caring. Only one student whose mother had worked at the school for many years said that he could go to any of his teachers with problems and they would listen.

Uncaring teachers, in comparison, were not necessarily thought of as disliking students, but rather as being detached from them. This distinction was clarified by an eighth grade female whose GPA had significantly dropped earlier in the year when a family crisis caused her to be absent from school for several weeks. Although her parents informed the school counselors, counselors failed to relay the message to teachers and subsequently she was not allowed to make up certain work. Her grades fell. When asked why she simply didn't explain the situation to teachers in order to make up the work, she reported, "I couldn't. I wouldn't feel comfortable telling the teachers."

As instructors, teachers were described as adults who "warn you when you aren't doing well and if you don't improve they get mad". Giving homework when students are absent, correcting mistakes, and trying to make students learn were typical descriptions of teachers did. Interestingly, many successful students were aware of teachers' instructional difficulties with disruptive students, and made unsolicited suggestions about ways relationships could be improved: "Teachers try, but some students won't do anything. They should have a class where the teacher will be patient with them". One seventh grader commented that there should be a class where students can stay with the same teacher most of the day. Describing his idea as a way to avoid "getting caught in the tardy sweep" and forgetting where he had to go, this seventh grade student emphasized that he would like such an option, not just students who had problems. Teachers as instructors overlapped with teachers who cared to varying degrees in the minds of successful students. For most, good instructors were those who cared. For others, the relationship was less clear-cut. Observed one student about teachers who had instructional problems in class: "It's not the teachers who don't like those students, but those students who don't like the teachers."

The most commonly held view of teachers surfaced in response to the question, "What are the most important rules you follow here?" Successful students repeatedly named only two rules: respect the teacher and be prepared (i.e. study, be on time, have your materials). Respect was paired with good behavior; it was commonly believed that referrals were usually given "for goofing around and smart-mouthing the teacher", things students would do when they didn't respect the teacher. The importance of respect and its relationship to doing well is illustrated in the following excerpt.

> JR: I just keep doing what I'm suppose to do and I get good grades.
> Researcher: What are you suppose to do to get good grades?
> JR: Basically your work, trying it, and getting help from teachers if you don't understand. You should be courteous and don't get into trouble. That's probably the best way to get a good grade in class.
> Researcher: Being courteous is the best way?
> JR: Yeah, being courteous to the teacher and your fellow students.
> Researcher: Why does that help so much?
> JR: If you act courteous they start thinking, ' This guy is intelligent and stuff. He knows how to act around other people.' It's the best way.

The use of the exact words, "respect your teacher" occurred in interview after interview with successful students, and provided an interesting perspective from which to compare the comments of at-risk students.

At-Risk Students Beliefs about Teachers. Like successful students, at-risk students described teachers as caring and uncaring. Unlike successful students, at-risk students saw teachers as adversaries and objects of rules.

The Directed Study teachers and an aide in their classroom were named more often by at-risk students as teachers who cared. They believed it was the job of these teachers to help them learn to do well, and as such they described them as adults who gave good advice and helped them negotiate the complex world of social relationships at the school. Most telling was a description offered by a student who had numerous referrals for defiance.

Researcher: What do you do when you have a real problem here?
KO: See Ms. T. She helps over there in [Directed Study class]. I just talk about things with her.
Researcher: Can you give me an example of some of her good advice?
KO: Yeah. Try to do your best no matter what the teacher says. Just don't listen to them (teachers). Like don't pay any attention to them.
Researcher: What does that mean?
KO: Just do your work and don't say anything back. Like if a teacher yells at you, don't make a negative reply.

Most of the target students in this group, however, could not name a teacher they would go to for help or a teacher who would listen to them. "I unusually don't think about my teachers like that," one student reported. Interestingly, even the at-risk students who were assigned to work in the office had seemingly not developed personal relationships with adults.

RK: I wouldn't go to nobody.
Researcher: Not even a counselor?
RK: No.
Researcher: That seems funny. Don't you work in the office?
RK: Yeah, but I don't *talk* to them. (student emphasis)

In every case where students told the researcher they had thought about dropping out of school, they also said they would not go to a counselor or teacher to talk about it.

Fieldnotes revealed a correlation between students who could not name any teacher who cared and students who most strongly associated teachers with adversarial roles. Common examples of teacher behaviors in this category were: not telling students about homework, not giving absent students make-up work, suspending students for laughing, asking for hall passes when teachers could see students holding passes, and telling students to hurry, to work, to do better, etc. or they would fail. In only a few instances was it possible to check these descriptions for accuracy: teachers' perspectives of the incidents students described occasionally appeared in the form of referrals for defiance. The point is, however, that students believed these behaviors to be accurate descriptions and they gave numerous examples of similar events that they described as occurring regularly. A possible explanation for at-risk students' views of teachers as adversaries was their failure to see teachers as instructors or to understand what that role entailed. Students, even those who said they needed to try harder, work harder, stay in school, etc., did not realize their own role in asking for clarification about homework (as opposed to the teacher not giving it) or taking responsibility for getting work missed due to absence. This, in turn, lead students to believe teachers were working against them.

The analysis that separated teachers as objects of rules from other categories was robust. "Don't talk back to the teacher" was recorded repeatedly in fieldnotes when students were asked what they might do differently after trouble-producing situations had occurred. "He yelled. That's why I left. I left because if I didn't leave I would have yelled right back," an eighth grader reported as she sat in the waiting area of the counselors' offices. This same student later received a referral for leaving the classroom without permission. In discussing the referral with the researcher the following day she explained, "Don't talk back to the teacher I know, but everybody does that anyway. Maybe if the teachers would give *a little respect* (student emphasis) to the kids we wouldn't be like that."

Though teachers' beliefs about at-risk students were not investigated in this study, it was apparent from both the quantity and written content of the referrals they gave that at-risk students were poorly behaved in the classroom. The picture that emerges is one of a

vicious cycle. It can hypothesized that teachers believed at-risk students lacked respect, that is, they were defiant. Students, in not understanding their own roles and responsibilities, believed teachers' behaviors represented uncaring attitudes. In the end, at-risk students' feelings of being "put down" led to increased misbehavior, and misbehavior led to time spent out of class. As Berstein and Rulo (1976) describe the cycle, with academic failure comes an increase in disruptive behavior and, as subsequently more attention is paid to controlling it, less attention is paid to academic learning.

The differences in levels of respect represented by at-risk and successful students' relationships with teachers can be summarized by looking at at the data on student descriptions of events that occurred when someone did poorly in class. Successful students made comments such as the following.

> •Well, the teachers warn you a lot of times.
> •The teacher helps them out usually, or they can make it up for extra credit or do extra things for assignments.
> •They get help from teachers or they get school assistance (after-school tutoring program). Sometimes they're taken to the vice principal and the vice principal personally sees that they improve.
> •When I need help I go and ask or if [teachers] see us and it looks like we aren't able to do something they say, 'Do you need any help?'

In contrast, at-risk students said, "They fail.", or more commonly, "They flunk.". When probed with questions like, "They just plain fail? Do they know they're going to fail?", students described events that occur after receiving a failing grade rather before the grade becomes final.

> •They call home and tell you you're going to summer school.
> •Sometimes you get sent out of class like I did. You get put in Directed Study.
> •You get put in that room (points to the Directed Study classroom). Then you can get help to bring up your grades.
> •You get sent to in-school suspension or after-school detention. It happens to me a lot.

Assertion 3. Extended friendship networks influence at-risk students' positive identification with school.

Analysis of the inventory items concerning peer relationships indicated only three differences between the at-risk and successful students.

Insert Table 2.

In two instances, differences favored the successful students. For example, 61% of the successful students indicated *they did not mind telling their ideas in class even when others disagreed* as compared to only 39% of the at-risk students. Similar difference were found on a related item, *My classmates think I have good ideas*. Only 58% of the at-risk students agreed, as compared to 77% of the successful students. These items indicated that when academic matters entered into peer relationships, at-risk students felt significantly less positive about them.

The item, *I am able to mix well with other people*, was the only item on the inventory to significantly favor the at-risk population over successful students. In combination with the remaining items on which no significant differences were found, this item indicated that classmates were generally a positive source of identification with school for at-risk students. That is, positive relationships with peers helped to meet the belonging

component of identification. Given the literature documenting association with dropouts and delinquent peers as strong predictors of delinquency (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Elliott et al.,1974; Hawkins, et al., 1985) and the greater frequency of deviant behavior documented for the at-risk group, the absence of significant differences between successful and at-risk students on peer relationship items was surprising. From inventory data it appeared that at-risk students' alienation from school did not stem from peer relationships, and that peer relationships were not unlike those experienced by successful students at the school.

Were peers a more positive source of identification with school perhaps because at-risk students' relationships with adults were so negative? Were peers a less positive or less important source of identification with school for successful students? Observation of friendship groups and data collected from interviews subsequently addressed these questions

Peer relationships at Southwest were influenced by the multicultural nature of its population and the existence of bands of students who were termed "wanna-be's" because they appeared to want to behave like gangs. For many students having friends from different cultures was an added benefit of attending Southwest. For some students, however, the multicultural nature of the school was the source of racial name-calling and ethnic cliques. Rich descriptive data were collected on student friendships that will not be reported here. The data pertaining to the guiding questions can be summarized, however, in the following generalizations:

1. Students believed that those who got high grades were not respected at the school: "If you're in advanced classes you get picked on. They call you names like you're a nerd"(Honor Student). Findings from the district study (district document), observation protocols, and interviews with both successful and at-risk students supported this view of those who got good grades at Southwest.

2. Physical prowess was important across cliques and friendship groups: "If they think you're no good, that you can't fight, they pick on you" (At-Risk Student). Observations and interviews, particularly with at-risk students who were most often involved in fights, supported the value of physical strength among peers at all achievement levels. While successful students were least likely to start fights, they did describe being picked on and challenged, which led to views that the ability to defend oneself was important. This was especially true for males, although females also reported involvement in fights. Several at-risk males described themselves as coming to the assistance of other students in protective ways that cut across achievement groups because of their abilities to fight.

3. Both successful and at-risk students were reluctant to attend activities or events after school due to commonly held beliefs about fighting among gang-like groups of students, and due to family responsibilities that were characteristic of students in both groups. Thus, participation in after-school activities was limited for both groups with the exception of the participation of several honor students in SAVED (Students Against Violence and Drugs) and STEP (System to Encourage Potential).

4. Both at-risk students and successful students reported having numerous friends at Southwest. When asked if their friends would answer interview questions about school in the same ways, at-risk students, with one exception, described having large numbers of friends who would agree and disagree. This held true under probing whether the at-risk student expressed positive or negative opinions about school. Successful students were more likely to describe their friends as agreeing with their descriptions of school.

It was clear from reading transcripts and fieldnotes that at-risk students at Southwest had friendship networks that extended beyond only other at-risk students, and that friendships were important reasons for coming to school. The extended friendship networks are partially explained by the school conditions described above. It is possible, however, that limited tracking played a role in the development of these friendships. At-risk students were, for the most part, tracked into only one class (Directed Study), and

examination of student schedules revealed that for the rest of the day the majority of students attended classes with average and good students.

Regardless of how many different kinds of friends at-risk students reported having, they were all aware that the "wrong kinds of friends" and "hanging around the wrong crowd" were potential sources of trouble. Truancy, in particular, was a group behavior engaged in by several of the at-risk students in this study. The influence of the wrong crowd was especially apparent for older students who had been at-risk longer and for whom friendship groups had increasingly narrowed. In interviews, two of the five ninth graders who had been retained the previous year hinted at this possibility. The following excerpt comes from an interview with one of those students.

> DM: Half of my friends don't like school. They think it's boring.
> Researcher: What's the difference? Why do some of your friends like it and some don't?
> DM: Because the people who doesn't like school, they think like me. And the others, they like school.
> Researcher: And they're still your friends? Why doesn't liking school rub off on you?
> DM: I don't know. [laughs] Well, the people who like school, skate.
> Researcher: You met them skating?
> DM: See. [pause] Look. The people I used to hang around with, they do good in school. They like to skate. I used to skate.
> Researcher: And the other half of your friends? How did you meet?
> DM: [pause] Just hanging around.

Assertion 4. At-risk students feel responsible for their performance but are unsure how to take responsibility for their learning.

In numerous instances data supporting this assertion can be drawn from data in each of the assertions already discussed. How students behaved within the school environment and how they interacted with teachers and peers influenced how they thought of themselves as learners and how they came to understand the role of learning.

Insert Table 3.

Data pertaining to teacher relationships, numerous significant differences were found between the school self-images of at-risk students and the self-images of successful students. These differences occurred on similar items that relate to the doing of academic work, and favored successful students. At-risk students reported themselves less able to: *do many things well in school, pick out the right things to study, give good reports*, and *do homework without help*. They also had significantly lower opinions of their abilities to learn and of other students' assessments of their abilities (*I am usually one of the last to be chosen....*)

What stands out in this inventory data, however, are the items on which no differences were found. Three of these, *When things go wrong, it is usually someone else's fault, When I do well it is more a matter of luck....*, and *If I don't do well, it is because I didn't try hard enough,* relate to locus of control and indicate that at-risk students assume as much responsibility for their work as do successful students. Finally, at-risk students report becoming discouraged in school no more often than successful students.

At first these data seemed to conflict with the patterns emerging in transcripts and protocols. In writing about their futures, as they were observed in the classroom, and as they described their school experiences to the researcher, at-risk students had little

understanding of the tasks involved in their roles as students. Why did they assume responsibility for its outcomes?

Engaging Work. Many at-risk students had ideas about subjects they wanted to learn, but few felt they had opportunities to do so: "You want to learn to draw and they give you typing." Public speaking, art, flight, the brain, drama, and dance, are examples of topics they wanted to learn if new courses could be added to the schedule. Only two students had no ideas. The extent to which students were still interested in learning was best illustrated by Fred, an at-risk student with poor reading and writing skills, who spoke nonetheless two languages fluently and had dreams of one day becoming a pilot.

> FH: Flight. Like being a pilot. Like how the structure of birds' wings are.
> Researcher: Why are you interested in birds' wings?
> FH: Well, it's really amazing. [begins a detailed description of how birds fly]
> Researcher: How do you know all this about birds?
> FH: Cause I studied birds for three years.
> Researcher: You did? Where?
> FH: Everywhere. Wherever I could find a book. Most of it I had to learn myself. Near the [navy base] where me and my Grandma go to K-Mart I get to look at the jet planes and study them.

Fred appeared with books about naval carriers, jets, and animals several times over the course of the study, and on one occasion sat with the researcher in the counselors' waiting area and described how aircraft are stored on the hanger deck when carriers are at sea. The extent of his knowledge was both amazing and exciting, but it did not seem to transfer to the classroom.

Among the at-risk students, 50% described themselves as avid readers of comics, mysteries, horror, and romance books. When questioned, they supplied names of favorite authors and listed books they had read several times. "I read almost anything you give me. I don't like writing and I don't like most anything else but reading. In the morning I read, during classes I read, and after school I read. Not textbooks. Just books. I read Stephen King and Andrew someone. He wrote Flowers in the Attic." Students were observed to read novels in the Directed Study class when they had finished work or grown frustrated with it, but, with the exception of Fred, they were not observed reading or doing any school work during the long periods many of them spent waiting outside the counselors' offices.

Writing was a different matter. With only two exceptions at-risk students indicated a general dislike of writing and indicated that they wrote very little in their free time. Written work examined attested to the extremely weak skills characteristic of the group as a whole, particularly when compared to the sophisticated writing of the more successful students. In comparison, successful students indicated that a significant portion of their free time was spent writing for pleasure or, in the case of one student, for her mother who had lived in California nineteen years but spoke no English.

That at-risk students did not think of themselves as competent students in the traditional sense was illustrated most clearly by Stephanie, a ninth grade office assistant who spent first period fielding phone calls from parents in Spanish and translating messages for the attendance secretary. "I really can't do anything well, not really." She enjoyed her work in the office, however, was rarely late or absent, and took pleasure in completing tasks that were assigned to her. To the observer she appeared professional and competent, and very much in control of her work.

Learning as Preparation for the Future. Probed for their beliefs on what they could do to improve their grades, at-risk students typically responded with, "I have to work on English and science,"etc., or "I want to do better. I need to study more." Only two students did not immediately suggest similar actions. It was apparent from reading

transcripts that these students took responsibility for their own work, or lack of it, and evidence indicated that one reason for this was their identification for the Directed Study class. They knew and spoke freely about assignment to the class, usually in the positive terms of going "to a class where people helped you", and were well aware of their shortcomings as students. In every case they reported their grades (What kind of a student would you say you are?) accurately to the researcher. Within the Directed Study class, itself, teachers were observed verbally stressing students' responsibilities, particularly as they pertained to completing assignments. The only evidence found that at-risk students attributed responsibility for their progress to a source other than themselves was in the inventory item, *Getting good grades depends more on how teachers feel about me than on how well I work*. (See Assertion 2, Table 1.) However, even in this instance it was not the teachers who were responsible so much as it was their feelings toward at-risk students as people.

A comparison of successful and at-risk students' essays about their ideal futures was most telling. A trend for at-risk students to indicate lower aspirations was noticed, however, not to the degree that has been suggested in the literature. Females, who indicated roles as wives and mothers without reference to other possibilities, may have been expressing cultural preferences more than preferences based on their beliefs about their abilities to work, and extremely alienated students wrote about dropping out, becoming janitors, hanging around, etc. Ogbu (1987) has suggested that minority students with subservient cultural histories perceive and respond to school differently; that is, they do not see educational opportunities as readily. With those exceptions, however, students' aspirations were not unlike those of the average group.

The greatest differences in students' essays stemmed from their descriptions of how they would prepare for the future, and the style in which they wrote about it. For example, successful students, particularly honors students, used imaging to write their essays: they wrote in the present tense as if the future existed. Honors students, and to a great degree, good/average students, connected education to their futures by naming specific courses they would need for specific occupations (i.e. entertainment lawyer, expert on Greek mythology, etc.), and by listing specific "engagement" behaviors (i.e. being curious, setting goals, not copying, showing self-confidence). Successful students also tended to cite the need for support from family and friends, and to list personal development goals as a part of their future: "I would learn to be proud of whom I am and where I stand." At-risk students made no such connections, and in only a few cases, mentioned school or education at all. While this may be partially explained by their limited writing skills, interviews with at-risk students about preparation for daily school events, as well as preparation for the futures they wanted, produced the same results.

> SM: Last year I didn't do so good and this year I'm having problems. [laughs] I only study when I have tests.
> Researcher: What about next year? Will you make any changes?
> SM: Well, I want to do better because I'll be in high school. I want to get my credits. I'm going to study more and hang around the right people and do better in school.
> Researcher: You mentioned problems with studying. Will you do anything differently? Will you set up a study schedule?
> SM: Schedule? Like what do you mean, 'a schedule'? [pause] Do you mean write it down?
> Researcher. Yes. Exactly.
> SM: [pause] Oh. [no further comments]

At-risk students were unable to articulate the specific skills or tasks that were components in "doing better work".

Finally, at-risk students did not make connections between good behavior and their progress in school. One of the most intriguing patterns to emerge in data analysis was that *rules* listed by at-risk students (What are the most important rules you follow here?) were named by successful students as *advice* (What advice would you give a new student here at Southwest?). Conversely, the rules named by successful students were the same behaviors named as advice by at-risk students. This pattern illustrates the greater cognizance of successful students about components of learning and purposes of school; that is, they believed "respect the teacher" and "come to class prepared, study, be ready", etc. were mandated rules and "don't fight, get into gangs", etc. were good advice. For at-risk students, experiences of school dictated a contradictory perspective. "Don't talk back to the teacher, don't fight" were their rules, and thus their greatest awareness of what happened in school. Their suggestions were to "not wait. Do good in school."

Discussion

Lipsitz (1984), in a case study of middle schools, has argued that positive faculty attitudes and teaching practices that maximize participation are the hallmarks of effective middle grade schools. Her findings overlap with the suggestions of other researchers who have investigated reasons students become alienated and eventually disengage from school completely. So important are these school context factors that some researchers have suggested alternative schools for at-risk students as a means of constructing more humanistic environments for those who seem least able to feel value and a sense of belonging within the regular school (Gold & Mann,1984)

In this descriptive investigation of at-risk students' school lives, complex respect relationships between students and teachers, and students' perceptions of learning as preparation for the future surfaced as factors negatively affecting performance. These factors were commonly felt by students; that is, they cut across the personality variations within the at-risk group, and revealed the significantly different school lives of at-risk students when compared to successful students in the same school.

These findings suggest that middle grade schools should provide teachers and students with training in communication strategies that demonstrate respect, and with organizational components that foster the growth of respect. As schools grow increasing larger and as time is increasingly absorbed by the more in-depth curriculum of secondary schools, human relationships become strained. Successful students, who may also feel alienated, appear to have the social skills that enable them to interact more effectively in larger environments. At-risk students feel threatened, perceive teachers as adversaries, and act on their feelings of alienation in unacceptable ways. In this study misbehavior led to a focus on correction as opposed to a focus on learning, and at-risk students became further removed from the skills needed to improve their academic standing. Schools that provide smaller environments and greater integration through structures such as teaming may positively affect the respect relationships between students and teachers. Team organizations may also assist teachers who have became detached from students and are unable to demonstrate the caring behaviors important to both successful and at-risk students through the support provided by other members.

This study suggests that more respectful student-teacher relationships could influence the abilities of at-risk students to perceive the connection between school as preparation and the futures they desired. Teachers and school self-image were found to be centrally involved in how students came to value and belong in school; that is, how they identified with school. In this study, junior high school was not seen as an important by at-risk students because they did not perceive the relationship between school and the future, and because they had no tangible evidence of progress such as course credits. Given the academic foundation these students did not develop in seventh and eighth grades, the power of the following student's mistaken insight can be seen.

DM: Tell them (new students) not to worry. Like we're going to high school and all this will happen again. Junior high is a warm up for the future.

Author's Notes

To protect the identity of students and the school, all names used in this paper are psuedonyms. The author greatfully acknowledges the contributions of Dr. Les Becklund in the preparation of the first draft of this paper.

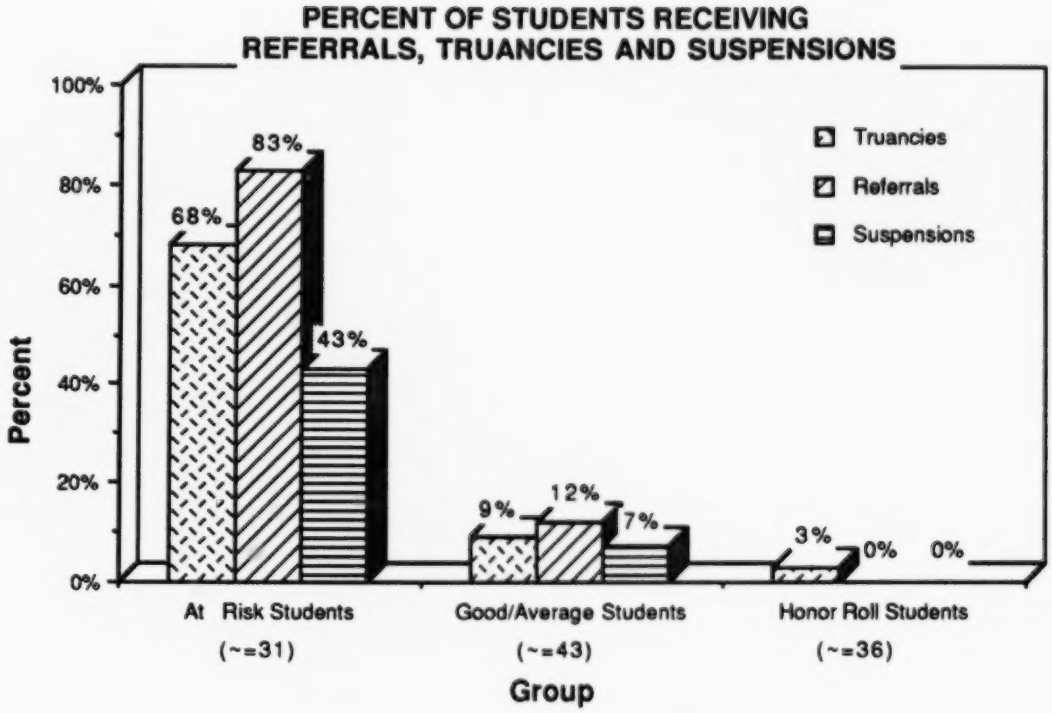
PERCENT OF STUDENTS RECEIVING
REFERRALS, TRUANCIES AND SUSPENSIONS
100%
80%
60%
40%
20%
0%
Percent
68%
83%
43%
9%
12%
7%
3%
0%
0%
Truancies
Referrals
Suspensions
At Risk Students
(~=31)
Good/Average Students
(~=43)
Honor Roll Students
(~=36)
Group

Table 1. An Analysis of Relationships with Teachers Comparing At-Risk Students with Those Who Are Not

Item	Honors/Average Responses Negative N=79	Honors/Average Responses Positive N=79	At-Risk Responses Negative N=31	At-Risk Responses Positive N=31	z-statistic
When I make a mistake, my teachers correct me without hurting my feelings.	11 (14%)	68 (86%)	8 (26%)	23 (74%)	1.35
(-) My teachers expect better work from me than I am able to do.	36 (46%)	43 (54%)	18 (58%)	13 (42%)	1.19
(-) My teachers usually ignore me.	12 (15%)	67 (85%)	10 (32%)	21 (68%)	1.83
(-) Getting good grades depends more on how the teacher feels about me than on how well I work.	22 (28%)	57 (72%)	15 (48%)	16 (52%)	1.99*
(-) In class I often feel "put down" by my teachers.	4 (5%)	75 (95%)	12 (39%)	19 (61%)	3.70***
I feel that my ideas are considered worthwhile by my teachers.	20 (25%)	59 (75%)	18 (58%)	13 (42%)	3.23***
I feel that my teachers understand me.	11 (14%)	68 (86%)	12 (39%)	19 (61%)	2.59***
I feel that my teachers listen to what I have to say.	13 (16%)	66 (84%)	13 (42%)	18 (58%)	2.60***

(-) indicates items scored in a negative direction.

* $z_{.975}=1.96$ (.05 level)

** $z_{.995}=2.58$ (.01 level)

*** $z_{.9995}=3.29$ (.001 level)

Table 2. An Analysis of Relationships with Peers Comparing At-Risk Students with Those Who Are Not

Item	Honors/Average Responses Negative N=79	Honors/Average Responses Positive N=79	At-Risk Responses Negative N=31	At-Risk Responses Positive N=31	z-statistic
(-) I don't like to tell my ideas in class if I think others will disagree with me.	31 (39%)	48 (61%)	19 (61%)	12 (39%)	2.13*
I feel accepted by my classmates.	14 (18%)	65 (82%)	6 (19%)	25 (81%)	.20
I am able to mix well with other people.	19 (24%)	60 (76%)	3 (10%)	28 (90%)	-2.01*
(-) I feel that my classmates do not consider me to be important.	21 (27%)	58 (73%)	11 (35%)	20 (65%)	.90
My classmates think I have good ideas.	26 (33%)	53 (67%)	17 (55%)	14 (45%)	2.11*
I feel that my classmates have confidence in me.	18 (23%)	61 (77%)	13 (42%)	18 (58%)	1.91
(-) I do not make friends as easily as most people.	29 (37%)	50 (63%)	12 (39%)	19 (61%)	.19

(-) indicates items scored in a negative direction.

* $z_{.975}=1.96$ (.05 level)

** $z_{.995}=2.58$ (.01 level)

*** $z_{.9995}=3.29$ (.001 level)

Table 3. An Analysis of School Self-Image Comparing At-Risk Students with Those Who Are Not

Item	Honors/Average Responses Negative N=79	Honors/Average Responses Positive N=79	At-Risk Responses Negative N=31	At-Risk Responses Positive N=31	z-statistic
I am able to do many things well in school.	5 (6%)	74 (94%)	11 (35%)	20 (65%)	3.23**
(-) When things go wrong for me, it is usually someone else's fault.	19 (24%)	60 (76%)	7 (23%)	24 (77%)	-.16
I am good at picking out the right things to study.	18 (23%)	61 (77%)	17 (55%)	14 (45%)	2.21*
I can give a good report in front of the class.	36 (46%)	43 (54%)	26 (84%)	5 (16%)	4.42 ***
(-) I often become discouraged in school.	27 (34%)	52 (66%)	13 (42 %)	18 (58%)	.75
(-) When I do well in school, it more a matter of luck than effort.	20 (25%)	59 (75%)	11 (35 %)	20 (65%)	1.03
(-) I have a low opinion of my learning ability.	13 (16%)	66 (84%)	18 (58%)	13 (42%)	4.25***
If I don't do well at something, it's usually because I didn't try hard enough.	13 (66%)	66 (84%)	6 (19%)	25 (81%)	.35
(-) I often need someone to help me do my school work.	19 (24%)	60 (76%)	16 (52%)	15 (48%)	2.71**
(-) I am usually one of the last to be chosen for a group activity.	12 (15%)	67 (85%)	11 (35%)	20 (65%)	2.14*
(-) I'm the sort of person who can't do anything in school really well.	12 (15%)	67 (85%)	12 (39%)	19 (61 %)	2.44*

(-) indicates items scored in a negative direction.

* $z_{.975}=1.96$ (.05 level)

** $z_{.995}=2.58$ (.01 level)

*** $z_{.9995}=3.29$ (.001 level)

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